



THOSE OTHER CHARLOTTE

Not all Charlottes are named
for the queen

By Russ Ford

Which way is Charlotte?

It all depends on which one you want. There are lots of them around, perhaps more than you may have imagined. Just check the signs on The Green, a minipark nestled between South Tryon and South College streets in uptown Charlotte.

The playful signpost with its colorful pointers is the creation of San Antonio artist Gary Sweeney. Sweeney also produced the “author” signs throughout the park, in which the names of cities and towns across the country are joined to form the names of famous writers, such as Mark (Illinois) and Twain (California).

Developed by Wachovia Bank in 2002 as part of the Ratcliffe condominium project and managed by Childress Klein Properties, The Green is, in fact, the roof of a parking garage. Four levels of underground parking are concealed beneath its landscaped terraces.

The park is filled with whimsical artwork, including a brick sculpture, “Life is an Open Book” by Brad Spencer of Reidsville, N.C.; the Fish Fountain, by Carolyn Braaksma of Denver, Colorado; and the Rhythm Walk with

its novel “sound art” by Jim Green, also of Denver, featuring the sounds of a kitten purring and water gurgling.

But one piece of art which tourists always pause to study is the signpost pointing to places named Charlotte. And Charlotte, it seems, is in all directions. Eleven Charlottes are mentioned, in addition to the one for which the artwork is named, “Charlotte—The Center of the Known World.” The signs point in the approximate direction of the locales they identify, and tell the distance in miles to each one.

Most of the Charlottes are small. Some are not even incorporated towns, but all share at least part of their names with the Queen City.

An information panel on the College Street side of The Green quotes Sweeney: “I wanted to give Charlotte a sense of identity, especially as it relates to the rest of the country.”

Although he is an accomplished artist whose work is widely exhibited, Sweeney has a sideline: For 29 years he has been a baggage handler for Continental Airlines.

“After college, I became yet another starving artist waiting to be discovered,” he explains. “A surfing buddy of mine asked me if I wanted a job as a baggage handler, and I needed a job, so of course I said yes. It sustained me during those lean years, and as I became more successful as an artist, I kept it as part-time work (insurance, travel benefits), and I have what to me is a perfect balance of artwork and physical labor.”

The San Antonio International Airport, where Sweeney is currently based, is one of many places where his work is displayed. Outside a parking deck, visitors see a series of signs poking sly fun at the usual airport advertising. One shows a vintage San Antonio terminal with the words, “Now open year-round!” Another says “HemisFair 68—You’re Way Too Late.”

Discussing his Charlotte work, Sweeney says, “I researched the Charlottes using a large atlas. I looked in the index under ‘Charlotte,’ and found that there were plenty. In fact, most city names are used repeatedly. For instance, there are 21 states that have ‘Denver’ in them, and 23 states with an ‘Austin.’ After collecting the Charlottes, I went onto Mapquest and found the mileage from Charlotte, North Carolina to the other Charlottes.”

There are other places named “Charlotte” around the country, in addition to the ones on the signpost. A quick Google search turned up communities in New York and Illinois, and others with names such as “Lake Charlotte” and “Port Charlotte.” One obvious question is whether all

are named for Queen Charlotte of England. It turns out, many are not. What follows is a brief survey of the eleven mentioned on Sweeney’s sign:

Charlotte, Tennessee, is located in north central Tennessee, about 35 miles west of Nashville. The town was established in 1808, and named for Charlotte Reeves Robertson, wife of Revolutionary War General James Robertson, a prominent early settler. It is the county seat of Dickson County and its courthouse, built in 1833, is the oldest functioning courthouse in Tennessee. The estimated population in 2007 was 1,166.

Charlotte, Maine, a village of 300 hardy souls, is about as far east as you can go in the continental U.S. It’s barely eight miles from the shore of Passamaquoddy Bay, which separates Maine from New Brunswick, Canada. The town had been called “Charlotte,” apparently in honor of Queen Charlotte, before it was officially chartered. But when the papers were drawn up in 1825, state representatives balked at the name because of lingering hostility toward England. In a last minute compromise, they agreed to name it Charlotte, but

not for the queen. Instead, it honors Charlotte Mulholland Vance, the wife of one of the delegates.

Charlotte Harbor, Florida, is a bay (or, more accurately, an estuary) on the southern Gulf coast of Florida, just north of Fort Myers. A community on the north shore of the bay shares the name, Charlotte Harbor. Originally dubbed “Carlos” by Spanish explorers, the area was later named “Charlotte” in 1775 by the English, in honor of Queen Charlotte. The area is known for its inviting white sand beaches, water sports and efforts to preserve its natural environment.

Charlotte, Texas, may be the one that gave Gary Sweeney the idea for his signs. It’s located about 50 miles south of San Antonio, where Sweeney works. The town was established in 1910 on the site of a former cattle ranch, its streets laid out like the spokes of a wagon wheel. It’s named for Charlotte Edwards, a relative of the town’s



JUSTIN PARR
Gary Sweeney with one of his signs at the San Antonio International Airport.

founder, J. F. Edwards. Oil was discovered near Charlotte in 1946. Today the surrounding area boasts more than 700 producing wells. The population of Charlotte, Texas was estimated in July 2007 as 1,788.

Charlotte Courthouse, Virginia, is the county seat of Charlotte County and is named for Queen Charlotte of England. History buffs would love this area. The courthouse itself, built in 1823, was based on sketches by Thomas Jefferson. Next door is another courts building, erected in 1830. Numerous other historic buildings dot the landscape. Although this is the closest of the “other Charlottes” (214 miles from the Queen City according to Sweeney’s sign), getting there would require a good map. The town of about 440 residents is at the junction of Virginia highways 40 and 47 in south central Virginia, some 50 miles west of Interstate 85.

Charlotte, Vermont, should be easy to find. Head south from Burlington, Vermont on U.S. 7 for about 15 minutes, and there you are. Turn right and drive another two miles to the eastern shore of Lake Champlain, where a short ferry ride will take you to Essex, New York. But don’t hurry to leave; there’s a lot to capture your interest here. The town was chartered in 1762, the same year our Mecklenburg County was formed, and is named for Queen Charlotte Sophia. The Census Bureau estimates 3,754 people live in Charlotte, Vermont, and call themselves “Charlotters.” Local folks, by the way, pronounce the name of their town “shuh-LOT,” with the accent on the second syllable. Major points of interest include Mount Philo State Park, the most frequently visited park in Vermont.

Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, is the capital of the U. S. Virgin Islands. The harbor, once a hangout for the pirates Captain Kidd, Bluebeard and Blackbeard, is now a popular stop for cruise ships. Formerly a Danish colony, Charlotte Amalie (Amalie is pronounced ah-MAHL-ya) was named for royalty, but not the queen of England. The honoree is

Charlotte Amalie of Hesse-Kassel, wife of King Christian V of Denmark.

Charlotte, Iowa, is a rural community of about 400 people surrounded by corn and soybean fields on the eastern edge of Iowa, about 15 miles from the Mississippi River. Kermit Ketelsen, a local historian, says the town got its start in 1852 when Albert Gilmore came over from Illinois and started a grist mill. The town is named for Gilmore’s wife, Charlotte, which residents pronounce “shar-LOT.”

Charlotte Waters, Australia, is by far the most remote of the “other Charlottes.” According to Sweeney’s sign, it is 9,975 miles from Charlotte, North Carolina. It’s almost dead center in Australia, in a desert-like area of the Outback. The name “Charlotte Waters” is ironic, as the average annual rainfall is about five inches. Charlotte Waters got its start as a telegraph station in the 1870s, and is named for Lady Charlotte Bacon of Oxford, England, who lived for a time in Australia. One of her sons, Harley Bacon, worked on the Overland Telegraph Line which established Charlotte Waters. The telegraph station was closed in the 1930s and is now in ruins.

Charlotte Hall, Maryland, is a community of about 1,300 people in southern Maryland, about 37 miles south of Washington, D.C. The name Charlotte Hall comes from a military school established there in 1774. The source of the school’s name could not be learned. St. Mary’s County, in which the town is located, is the oldest county in the state. This year they are celebrating the 375th anniversary of the first English settlement there.

Charlotte, Michigan, is a city just off Interstate 69, 22 miles southwest of Lansing. The U. S. Census Bureau estimates the population of Charlotte in 2007 was 9,026. The town was first settled in the 1830s and is named for Charlotte Bostwick, wife of one of the original developers. Major local employers include aluminum, plastics and auto-related industries.